

RENAISSANCE

THE REBIRTH OF THE FRENCH ARMY IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

A BRIEF SURVEY

W. B. Wilson
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~DEDICATION~

To Marc Boileau
Résistant and Officer of the French Air Force
R. I. P.

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*Then the silence closed upon me till They put new clothing on me
Of whiter, weaker flesh and bone more frail;
- Kipling, "In the Neolithic Age"*

In Anglophone society, the common narrative of France in the Second World War focuses almost exclusively upon the French capitulation of June 1940. If France's role is otherwise considered, the list of topics is brief, with the sinking of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir and the occasional difficult relations with De Gaulle as ally, some of the most frequently mentioned.

Far less often encountered are narratives examining France's military role after Operation TORCH, and with one notable exception, many of these narratives are either brief or defective in their description of the French forces and their accomplishments during the latter part of the war. That France deployed a field army in northwest Europe during the final eight months of the war is little known; much less known are the existence and activities of the French forces on the Alpine and Atlantic fronts during 1944-45.

Yet, those familiar with the postwar occupation of Germany know that France was granted an occupation zone of its own as well as a sector of West Berlin, and these occupation zones were granted by the Allies in recognition of France's contributions to victory against Germany during the latter half of the war. The story of these contributions has been only partially related in English-language literature. De Lattre's "The History of the French First Army" tells much of the story, but addresses neither the campaigns in Tunisia and Italy, nor the operations in the Alps or against the German pockets on the Atlantic coast. The complete operational history, in English, remains to be written. The failure of English-language historiography to competently address this topic represents a loss to students of the history of the war, precisely because the opportunity to interview French veterans of the war has passed.

This document will address, in brief form, the regeneration of the French Army by discussing the three main sources of manpower and the units formed with this manpower. French efforts realized the mobilization of over one million men under arms by VE-Day, an accomplishment worthy of more note than has been thus far granted by historians of the war. If France's army of May 1945 was numerically only a shadow of the forces in the field in May 1940, the 1945 army was exponentially more effective, and significantly, a far more accurate gauge of French military determination and efficiency in the postwar era than their more numerous predecessors of the *Six Weeks that shook the West*.

March, or Die.

- Unofficial motto of the French Foreign Legion

When Germany defeated France in 1940, the French Army and the French Empire, to an extent, splintered into two factions. By far the larger of the two was Vichy France, by treaty the legitimate government and military of France and nominally a neutral power. Most of France's colonies remained under Vichy control, an unsurprising outcome when one considers the traditionally conservative mentality of government officials and military officers – who were sworn to uphold the legitimate government, their opinions of its recent history notwithstanding. The far smaller, but ultimately far more influential for France, second faction rallied around General De Gaulle and became known as the Free French.

Although the Free French were “in the fight” on the Allied side much sooner than the Vichy troops in the French colonies, an interesting observation is that, once well-equipped, both groups fought with a notable tenacity and flair that recalled more the French national sacrifice at Verdun in the First World War than the desperate floundering of the spring of 1940. It is no exaggeration to state that France's colonial forces, including the storied regiments of the Foreign Legion, played an outsized role in the reestablishment of France's military reputation and the liberation of French territory in Corsica, Provence, and Alsace. One should also note that many of these regiments were primarily manned with Senegalese, Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians. Many of these African men ended their lives *Mort pour la France*, but in doing so, established a significant ethnic presence in postwar metropolitan France.

From relatively small beginnings in June 1940, De Gaulle's Free French expanded first to roughly the size of a brigade and then ultimately to a force of two divisions by 1943. The story of the Free French, in comparison to other French late-war forces, has been well-addressed in English-language historiography and it is unnecessary to repeat much easily accessible information. Some aspects of these units, however, deserve further comment.

The first notable characteristic of these units (the 1st “Free French” Division and the 2nd Armored Division) is that they were possessed of a firm sense of moral purpose, believing they had bucked the norms of common behavior in refusing to accept the defeat of France in 1940 and continuing to fight against Germany, the armistice be damned. While this belief provided a strong source of moral courage for the Free French, it also led to friction with other units of the French Army who only returned to the Allied side after Operation TORCH. In particular, Leclerc's 2nd Armored Division found operations with other French Army units troublesome and spent much of the campaign under the operational direction of U.S. corps commanders.

The other aspect of these two divisions is that they constituted a legion politically loyal to De Gaulle, and the general was on occasion prone to employ them in roles that, while politically valuable to the French provisional government, did not necessarily further the overall goal of Allied victory in Europe. This notwithstanding, both divisions repeatedly proved themselves in combat.

The Tunisians are women, the Algerians are men, and the Moroccans are heroes.

- Moroccan wisecrack, referring to the relative qualities of Maghrebi soldiers

The largest parts of the French forces to return to the Allied cause were those of the colonial army – the divisions and regiments of French North and West Africa. Made up of both African natives and French settlers, these troops were a significant and welcome source of trained manpower for the Allies. Reequipped with British and U.S. matériel and provided with training on then-current weapons and tactics, the French colonial forces went on to repeated victories over their German foes.

The hard core of the French Expeditionary Corps in Italy, and the First Army in France and Germany, was provided by the divisions formed from the colonial army. Such units as the 2nd Moroccan Division, the 3rd Algerian Division (classed as “shock troops” by the Germans), the 4th Moroccan Mountain Division, the 9th Colonial Division, and the 1st and 5th Armored Divisions were formed from the colonial forces. By and large, their organization matched that of 1943 U.S. infantry and armored divisions.

Smaller, more specialized, and even tougher units were also formed – the 1st Parachute Infantry Regiment, the “Africa” and “France” commando battalions, the “Shock” battalion (a forerunner in terms of mission of the U.S. Army Special Forces), as well as four Moroccan light mountain infantry regiments called *Goumiers* who were highly respected by the Germans for their infiltration and close-in combat skills.

The French battlefield successes in Tunisia, Italy, Elba, and Corsica are almost entirely attributable to these “former Vichy forces” – which proved admirably effective in combat against the Germans.

But within a year of the end of the war in Europe, the histories of these battle-hardened divisions would come to an end (along with those of the Free French divisions) – the outcome of severe budgetary pressures in a France impoverished by the German occupation and the burden of war debts. In a historiographical development marred by irony, the noteworthy battlefield achievements of these men came to be less remembered than those of the significantly less numerous French volunteers and draftees who, for a variety of reasons, served in the *German* forces. Such were the twisted mores of Western societies deeply frightened by the manifest power of the Soviet Army in the postwar era. Today, shallow information sources such as the internet are far more apt to note the presence of a few hundred French SS volunteers at the Battle of Berlin than to recount the signal service of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers of the French colonial empire who so ably served the Allied cause.

French Forces of the Interior helped . . . by interfering with enemy railroad and highway movements and enemy telecommunications, by developing open resistance on as wide a scale as possible

- U. S. military historian Forrest C. Pogue, in *The Supreme Command*

Besides the Free French and the colonial army, a third source of manpower became available with the liberation of France itself – the population of metropolitan France. As liberation of the homeland became a reality, members of the various factions of the Résistance, former soldiers and policemen, and civilian patriots organized into ad-hoc units (swelling to some 400,000 strong by October 1944) that came to be collectively known as the French Forces of the Interior (FFI). In an act of political acumen, on 20 June 1944 De Gaulle's provisional government decreed the mobilization requirements dating from the start of the war were still in effect, that the FFI units were to be made part of the French Army, and that the FFI was subject to French military law. This decree laid the groundwork for the eventual incorporation of the FFI units into the regular French military.

While this was a straightforward policy, the actual integration of the FFI units (which included communist cadres possessed of aims far removed from those of De Gaulle) into the regular army was a lengthy process fraught with difficulty, not least because of the populist character of many of the FFI units and their dislike of traditional military procedures and discipline. Nevertheless, under farsighted leaders like De Lattre, the FFI units were by-and-by instructed in conventional combat, including such advanced topics as combined-arms offensive operations. As the FFI units “graduated” from being units specialized in irregular actions to units fully competent in modern warfare, they were incorporated as battalions, regiments, and demi-brigades of the regular army.

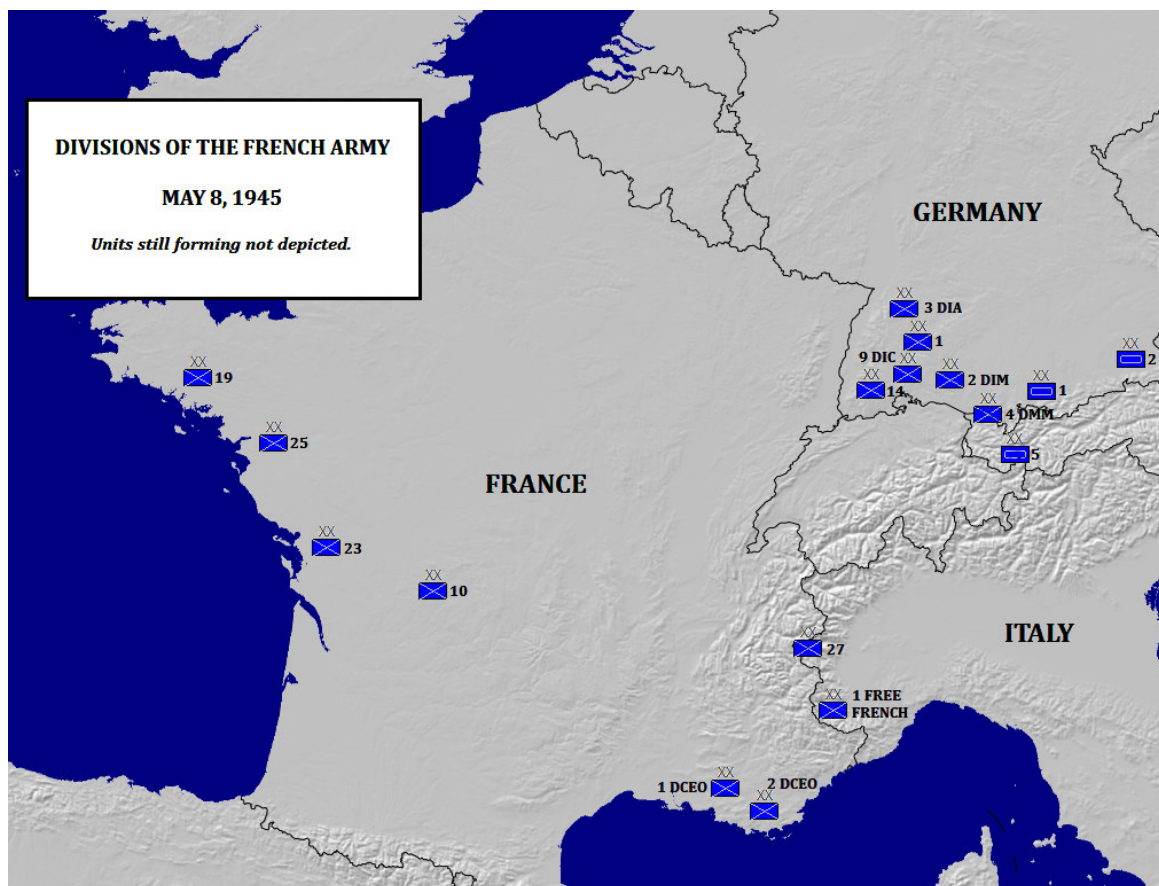
Simultaneously, and complementing the regular army amalgamation of the FFI units, the French Army began conscription and training of available manpower in order to enlarge their forces in action against the Germans. This process, like the amalgamation of the FFI units, was anything but straightforward. Because of the German occupation, the French industries that produced military armaments and equipment were mostly out of business. The Americans had only agreed to provide equipment for a limited number of divisions, and French units organized beyond this limit had to scrounge uniforms, equipment, and weapons from any available source. It was a poor man's war, and the subsequently organized French regiments and divisions reflected this material scarcity. Thus, these French “metropolitan” forces wore uniforms that were mixes of old French patterns as well as of British and U.S. origin. There were serious shortages of boots and trousers, but these issues paled in comparison to the difficulty in supplying weapons. Infantry and artillery weapons of diverse origins were issued, as well as captured and obsolete Allied vehicles of all kinds. One can imagine the difficulties faced by the ordnance and maintenance specialists of these units as they attempted to keep some degree of equipment serviceability.

Despite these challenges, France organized 84 infantry and artillery regiments (or demi-brigades) from FFI manpower and conscription. While some of these units served independently of divisional affiliation, others were brought together to reestablish the 1st, 10th, 14th, 19th, 23rd, and 25th Infantry Divisions as well as the 27th Alpine Division. By the end of the war, two colonial infantry divisions

(the 1st and 2nd) were formed as well, in addition to three others in the process of formation, the 3rd Armored Division and two further regular infantry divisions, the 29th and the 36th.

The 27th Alpine Division served on the Alpine Front and the 1st and 14th Divisions reinforced the First Army in Alsace and Germany. The 10th, 19th, 23rd, and 25th Divisions, as well as parts of the others, were assigned to the Atlantic Front forces screening the pockets formed by German forces that had become trapped in Atlantic ports after the rapid Allied advance of the summer of 1944. Independent regiments performed essential security tasks, screened the border with Franco's Spain, and reinforced the Czechoslovak Brigade during the Siege of Dunkirk.

The formation of the "metropolitan" divisions represented a culmination of organization that began with hundreds of company- and battalion-sized bands of Résistance fighters. This organizational activity successfully channeled the patriotism of liberated France's manpower into a mobilization effort that significantly enlarged the size of the standing army. The named companies, groups, battalions, and regiments of the FFI were gradually organized into numbered FFI units and finally amalgamated with the regular army. From a strength of 550,000 men and women in October 1943, the French Army was built up to a total of 1.3 million soldiers by the time of Germany's defeat in May 1945.



Yet let's be content, and the times lament, you see the world turn'd upside down

- The World Turned Upside Down

By the end of the Second World War in Europe, the world had indeed turned upside down for France. Germany's war had demolished the prewar order and reduced the western and central European states to the status of regional powers. Europe was dominated by two external powers and would remain so for almost half a century.

The immediate postwar years offered no respite. France, like other European powers, had to maintain enough military strength to remain at least a regional power in Europe while struggling to retain control of her overseas empire which had proved such a crucial asset during the mid-war recovery from the defeat of 1940. These latter efforts bore bitter fruit as the colonies in Indochina and North Africa were ultimately lost, with the situation in Algeria almost provoking a civil war in France itself. Internally, the French Army had to unite the former Free French, colonial soldiers, and soldiers of FFI provenance into a single postwar institution, and inevitably, service politics and wartime rivalries impacted this process.

The French military, though, had changed. The postwar military was tough and accustomed to setbacks – as well as savvy in recovery from such. The old, ponderously large army became a thing of the past. The modern French Army was far smaller, but with a larger proportion of elite units. It was this post-1945 transformation that defined the appearance and structure of the French Army today. Strangely, many of the modern critics of France and her army appear to be unable to see beyond the events of 1940 – their view is fixed on the prewar French state and military. To understand the modern French Army, and France itself, one does better to consider the regeneration of the French Army during the final half of the war and the operations undertaken by that force. What happened in 1940 belongs to the past, but that which occurred from 1943 to 1945 still informs the present.



Distinctive Unit Insignia of the 3rd Algerian Division

Further Reading

Roger Michalon. *Les Grandes Unités Françaises*, Volume VI. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1980.

Jacques Vernet, *Le Réarmement et la Réorganisation de l'Armée de Terre Française (1943 – 1946)*. Paris: État-Major de l'Armée de Terre, 1980.

Marcel Vigneras, *Rearming the French*. Washington: GPO, 1957.